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Youth Theater Camp Prepares Full Musical Within Three Weeks

Lamorinda Theatre Academy's "Thoroughly Modern Millie, Jr." a thoroughly thrilling experience

By Clare Varellas



Members of the cast block a dance scene.

Photos Clare Varellas

Enter the studio of Lamorinda Theatre Academy near La Fiesta Square in Lafayette any day this week between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., and you'll be greeted with the sights and sounds of the 1920s, or at least the stage version.

As the participants of Lamorinda Theatre Academy's summer camp hurriedly prepare a production of Jazz Age-set musical "Thoroughly Modern Millie, Jr." within the three-week span of the camp session, 19 girls and one boy between the ages of 10 and 13 spend their days running Broadway songs, trying on vintage costumes, scribbling blocking in scripts, and prancing the Charleston in tap shoes.

"It's kind of intense, and it's not as long as anyone would hope to have, but it's a fun experience because then you kind of know what show business is like," said camper Nora Schultz, 12, a member of the ensemble. "You have to know it really quickly."

Teaching such value of hard work was one of the focuses of co-owners Rena Wilson and Renee DeWeese when the pair started the academy three and a half years ago, in addition, of course, to fostering fun and an appreciation for the arts. Wilson, an actress for Beach Blanket Babylon, and DeWeese, a longtime performer for various Bay Area theater companies, met at an audition for Diablo Theatre Company's "Peter Pan" in 2007, and decided to start the academy after teaching theater to youth for separate companies.

"One day we were just like, 'Why are we doing this for other people? We should go into business together,' so we did just that," said DeWeese. "We both have strengths in very different places, but together, combined, we sort of hit everything."

By "everything," DeWeese is referring to a combination of acting, singing, and dancing, all of which are plentiful in "Thoroughly Modern Millie, Jr."

The camp, one of several that the academy holds during the summer in addition to its year-round lessons and school enrichment programs, featured eight days of theater workshops to develop campers' skills after the first two days were spent on auditions, callbacks, and casting.

Beginning the third day of the camp, which started on July 13, campers spent the mornings in workshops honing their stage skills, and the afternoons preparing the show.

Now, only hours from opening night on July 31, they spend the entire day preparing the show, for which everyone is very excited.

"I'm always excited about the nervous part, where right before the show I feel so nervous, and then right when I get out on stage, it's an amazing feeling," said Mackenzie Bunzel-Hardie, 12, who plays lead role Millie in the show. "It's so fun."

Bunzel-Hardie, as Millie, will depict a country girl who moves to the big city to find love and wealth, but who learns about friendship and what's really valuable in life in the process. This version of the show, shortened and made family-friendly by Musical Theatre International, is shorter and more age-appropriate than its 2001 Broadway counterpart, but just as packed with booming 1920s culture.

"Even though it's current, it has the feel of an old classic musical, so we also like that," said DeWeese. "The kids get to learn dances from the Roaring 20s and that style of old, classic Broadway is in the music."

The style is also in the costumes, sourced from the academy's collection, other theater companies, or made especially for the show. Sometimes campers pick up life skills just learning how to fasten a double-breasted jacket or slip on a dress, Wilson and DeWeese say.

It's all in preparation for the show, which will be held at Campolindo Performing Arts Center at 7 p.m. on July 31 and 2 p.m. on Aug. 1, open to the public. In the meantime, campers continue working hard and going home exhausted, but also happy.

"I think they also go home excited, which is our most important thing," said Wilson. "We want kids to go home excited about the performing arts, and whether a kid ends up pursuing this as a job or whether they just become a lifelong theater patron, our goal is to expose the kids to the arts, so that they know what it's all about, and they can appreciate it for the rest of their lives."



Some of the show's colorful, 1920s-era costumes

Support Still Strong for ALS Awareness

By Daniel Smith



Caitlin Januszewski of Orinda was doused by Matt Chaney's son, Brian, during last year's Ice Bucket Challenge. Photo provided

Remember the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge last summer? Your Facebook feed was probably filled with videos of friends and celebrities pledging their support in the battle against ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), then pouring a bucket of ice water over their heads. In doing so they earned the privilege of calling out others to do the same. On and on it went, each time more elaborate, or with bigger buckets or bigger names.

Critics accused the social media trend of encouraging more self-applause than activism or philanthropy. They speculated that the ALS awareness generated was wider than it was deep and prognosticated fading public interest.

If the Live Vines Wine Tasting and Auction on July 16 was any indication, both interest and financial support remain strong. The public fundraiser brought in \$38,000 for The ALS Association Golden West Chapter, a top rated nonprofit, and drew a thoroughly engaged crowd of over 100 to the Orinda Country Club venue. Brian Griggs, the evening's event chair, revealed that ALS "has an unfortunate place in the (Orinda Country Club)." In the last decade, OCC has lost five members to the disease. An astronomical figure considering the number of cases is about 3 per 100,000.

Three guests living with ALS were joined by an entourage of supporters. Among them was Lafayette resident Matt Chaney. Griggs, in addition to his duties as event chair, was also there for Chaney. The two are old friends. Both coached little league before Chaney's diagnosis in 2001. It was Chaney's decision to join The ALS Association that inspired Griggs to get involved.

Chaney has received wider support from Lafayette as well. The Lafayette City Council last year gladly rose to the Ice Bucket Challenge when Chaney challenged them. Chaney, reciprocating the show of solidarity, took the frigid dousing alongside them. "I love living in Lafayette," said Chaney.

Detractors of the Ice Bucket Challenge were skeptical whether the social media sensation could muster significant money, but attendees from The ALS Association Golden West Chapter were quick to point out that the intake of money had been good. Quite good. Over \$200 million was raised worldwide for ALS charities. The ALS Association, which is entirely dependent on donations, received \$115 million of that. By comparison, the organization received only \$18.1 million during the entirety of 2013. Of the 3 million people who donated, 2.5 million were doing

so for the first time. The Golden West Chapter members were anything but reserved in sharing how they have spent the Ice Bucket Challenge money.

The ALS Association donated \$77 million to research. They awarded \$1.5 million to Cytokinetics, a South San Francisco biopharmaceutical company. Robert Blum, CEO and president of Cytokinetics, made a momentous announcement before a rapt audience at Life Vines: Thanks in part to this grant, his company has just launched late-stage clinical trials for their developmental new drug, Tirasemtiv. The drug offers a new hope for ALS patients whose only current FDA approved treatment is Riluzole, which can cost patients \$1,200 a month while only extending their lives by mere months.

The ALS Association feels it's important to expedite drug research into the late-stage trials, bringing potential life-prolonging medicine to desperate ALS patients who usually only live two to five years past diagnosis. Besides, argues Golden West Chapter CEO and President Fred Fisher, "the cure for ALS isn't going to be found in a lab, it will be found in a patient living with ALS."

Another \$23 million has gone toward patient and community services. This money helps fund ALS Association Certified Centers of Excellence. These are multidisciplinary treatment centers that act as "one stop shops" where patients can receive all of their doctors, specialists, equipment, and medicine in one location. Simple concept, massive benefits. According to The ALS Association, these certified centers can significantly extend life expectancy.

Despite real progress, the biggest buzz of the evening still concerned the Ice Bucket Challenge and the revelation that The ALS Association is already underway on an ambitious public relations campaign to revive it for a second summer beginning in August. When asked how many seasons the challenge might last, members were unanimous in their response: "Every summer until a cure." Expect to see that slogan soon.

Of course, the association is sensitive to environmental realities. Fisher offered this drought-conscious advice: "It's important for people to understand that it's called the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, even if you pour a bucket of straw over your head."

The ALS Association Golden West Chapter will be hosting their bike-riding fundraiser Napa Valley Ride to Defeat ALS on Sept. 26 and their East Bay Walk to Defeat ALS on Oct. 24. More information can be found online at: www.alsgoldenwest.org.

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